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SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: MINISTRY OF INFORMATION, PRISONS, AND
WOMENS MAGAZINES

1. Summary: The Omani Internet chat room "Sablat al-Arab" -- or simply "Al-Sablah" -- is the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language forum for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, Al-Sablah nevertheless offers a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

--- The Ministry of Information and the Omani media
--- Human Rights Violations in Omani Prisons
--- Censorship and Omani Women's Magazines

End summary.

The Ministry Of Darkness

2. Al-Sablah members are discussing the Ministry of Information's decision to ban some Omani journalists and how the decision is impacting the Omani media environment. Some members argued, "The ministry of information should be called the ministry of darkness for the injustices it perpetrates against Omani journalists. The most frightening thing is that each year the ministry seems more determined to deny us the right to a free press." Another member asked, "What gives the ministry of information the right to rule over us and to control everything we see and hear." Several participants offered examples of incidents that they believe demonstrate the harmful effect that the ministry has on press freedoms. One stated, "The ministry is behind the decision to pull television shows. It regularly has television presenters fired because their guest express opinions that are not favored by the government. Another participant wrote, "There was a famous TV talk show hosts who discussed social issues and explored people's opinions about them. His show was taken off the air until he 'improved' its content." The discussion concluded with the same participant adding, "The ministry ordered the show's announcer banned for good when he returned for from a 'hiatus' and did a program on poverty in Oman."

Human Rights Violations In Omani Prisons

3. One Al-Sablah member began a discussion on the violation of human rights in Omani prisons stating, "There are major violations of human rights in Oman's prison's. I have heard of numerous cases of police officers torturing innocent people into confessing to crimes that they did not commit. Another member asked, "Do international organizations check or monitor the situation in Omani prisons?" One member share a personal experience, "When I went to visit someone, thank God it was an official visit, I saw a long line of women, children, and old people waiting outside on one of the hottest days of the year just to enter the visitor's line with no guarantee that they would see their loved ones." Another member stated, "Omani prisons are so bad that they cannot even meet the most basic human rights criteria like the right to see an attorney or the right to have access to family members. If our prisons cannot even satisfy these requirements, we should not be surprised that other more egregious violations occur."

Do Omani Women's Magazines Escape Censorship?

4. Al-Sablah also discussed whether women's magazines are subjected to censorship. One member states, "It appears women's magazines enjoy a free to provide their readers quality information on any aspect of Omani life, but other publications are denied this freedom." One participant responded, "Omani women's magazines may seem to have more freedom but if you compare them with other international or regional magazines you can see the difference." Another member stated, "One of the most widely read women's magazine in Oman has a foreign board of directors, foreign editors, and a foreign marketing staff. This, which may explain its willingness to explore substantive issues." Several members speculated on the effect that censorship has in determining the quality of a magazine stating, "It seems women's

magazines are successful because they largely manage to avoid the heavy hand of censorship." Other participants responded by stating, "Perhaps the censors are less stringent on women's magazines because they lack understanding of the real issues effecting Omani women's lives and are therefore less apt to censor articles and information published in Omani women's magazines."

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